Stop calling those who speak up a ‘vocal minority’

By Invitation

Labelling people into opposing groups of ‘vocal’ and ‘silent majority’ is not helpful for public engagement.

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For The Straits Times

Government leaders in Singapore receive a lot of feedback and feedback from diverse individuals and groups, both publicly and behind closed doors. Not surprisingly, there are different opinions on how appropriate leaders’ reactions are and how effective their responses may be.

For several years now, there have been calls for government leaders to see things from the people’s perspectives. Commentators and activists have often asked the Government to be able and willing to listen to alternative viewpoints and consider them seriously.

Thus, it was not a new message this week when Members of Parliament from all sides spoke on the need for leaders to effectively engage the people and earn public trust.

Both in and outside Parliament, this point on the importance of public engagement has become more salient after last week’s unexpected change of government in neighbouring Malaysia, when the ruling coalition, which had governed for six decades, lost the general election to the opposition.

Singaporeans watching across the Causeway felt as though the political tsunami that knocked the government out of power up north, was lapping at our shores.

This psychological salience is not a bad thing for Singapore. It guards against complacency and reminds all to never take public trust and public engagement for granted.

Reacting to contrary views

Policymakers and governments able to take on board seriously the views of well-intentioned people will often find that each input contributes positively to the policy or issue at hand. This is because genuine views are relevant considerations, even if leaders disagree with them.

But the outcome will be negative if leaders react inappropriately and dismiss the contrary views without engagement. It gets worse if they attach a label with negative connotations, for example dismissing views as representing “a vocal minority”. People will get upset and disengage, thus depriving the leaders of potential valuable inputs.

Emotional contagion occurs as people share with each other their negative experiences and emotions. This mutual reinforcement leads to a negative spiral. As views from different viewpoints between people and the leaders are accentuated, facts get ignored, and people seek out information to support their negative beliefs of the leaders. In some cases, people even fly in the face of the leaders’ advice or flight from the leaders or fight them.

This negative scenario can occur even when leaders are neither ignorant nor arrogant, although being so will certainly contribute to it. The tendency to react to contrary viewpoints is a part of human psychology. It can apply to every leader regardless of educational background, socio-economic status, political belief and moral position.

But if leaders understand the underlying psychology, they will be not just principled but also adaptive — able to handle disagreements effectively and create a lot of good from contrary views.

Vocal minority vs silent majority

One important psychological issue concerning a “vocal minority” and “silent majority” is to describe the segments of the population.

Last Sunday, Straits Times Columnist Chua Mui Hoong wrote a commentary in The Straits Times on ways to tackle Singapore’s first election from the Malaysian General Election. After her first takeaway, she cited a point I have often made in presentations and in my writings — about where each of us may be part of a “vocal minority” on some issue and where the various vocal minorities can add up to a sizable majority. She concluded: “Politicians dismiss vocal minority issues at their own peril.”

Put another way, there are actually many people who are voicing concerns, or trying to, in various ways, and on various issues, that matter to them. Add them up and the number can form a majority.

And it also means we should assume there is always a silent majority who do not speak up on issues, and are somewhat happy, agreeable and share a similar viewpoint on the status quo. This is to say that a silent and singular group, if it exists, it is as large or larger than one may intuitively think.

First, labelling groups does not help policymakers. If indeed people say a vocal minority and a silent majority on one particular policy issue and the two groups have opposing views, it does not mean that the minority is wrong, or that the majority is right.

Adaptive leaders know that positive policy changes can come from a good idea that started as a lone voice or minority viewpoint. They also know that minority views, may serve to check against complacency and groupthink.

The point is this: What.appears. way, how valid an argument is, and how effective a policy is, are all separate from how vocal a minority is, how small or big the minority and majority groups, and what the majority wants. Group labels are not views.

Second, having a binary division of those people respond to an issue is not constructively and can have negative consequences. Let my sample people into one of two mutually exclusive groups with opposing views — one is vocal and the other silent. An exclusive mindset can evolve or emerge into vocal divides. Some may ask the divisive question: “Are you with us or against us?”

Deciding people into two camps will not help identify what is common, despite the differences, and how the differences can in fact work in complementary ways.

The binary distinction often misrepresents reality. For most major public issues such as immigration, taxes, minimum wages and Internet regulation, it is not true that there are only two different and opposing views in the population. The more complex an issue gets over time in public discourse, like that on social inequality, the greater the spectrum of views. Some people may even move their position along the spectrum. People who are vocal can have very different views. This is clear when there are many viewpoints and disagreements in public life. Someone may say one is wrong on an aspect of public policy, others may do so on another aspect or the particular time.

Those who are silent can also have very different views. But we may not know what these views are, or how they are similar or different from those espoused by vocal people. Without evidence, there is no basis to say that a group labelled as a silent minority share the same view, and that it is opposite to that articulated by the vocal minority group.

Engaging those who disagree and the ambiguval

Rather than dismiss those who speak up on topics as belonging to a “vocal minority”, leaders should pay attention to those who disagree and those who are ambivalent.

They span across all demographics and socio-economic groups, and can represent the pluses and minuses, and they are unsure what to feel, think or do. They are elective leaders.

By calling people a vocal minority or a silent majority, instead of intermediaries and outsiders, this puts leaders at a disadvantage. Because the large majority of people do not see things straight in disagreement do so. Despite the costs and potential risks because they hope to make a difference. Ambivalence is a discomforting and confusing state of mind. It is not easy to effectively engage those who disagree or are ambivalent. But there is much to be done.

Leadership in engagement

What does all this mean for Singapore? Simply that we should not label people as belonging to a “vocal minority” when tackling a particular issue. And do not label the rest as silent majority and assume that they agree with you, the issue.

Calling people a vocal minority or silent majority when the issue is one that hurts more than helps policymaking, social cohesion and the creation of solutions. If all we will to stop or start a policy, find that vocal and resolvable disagreements are less likely to end up in a polarisation of attitudes.

But leaders are human too. The challenge for principled leaders is to be aware of their confirmation biases to see only the strengths in their own position and only the weaknesses in the opposition view. Being principled involves doing what one believes is the right view. But it does not mean one is right all the time.

Principled leaders are also human. The challenge for principled leaders is to know when to stop, when to adapt, and when to acknowledge that you are wrong. Be humble, able and willing to acknowledge your bias, and listen, learn and listen from others, and can see things from a different perspective.

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